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AUTHOR Freiberg, Melissa R.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The experiences of five mentors for beginning teachers in an urban school district were examined in this study. The results of interviews with the mentors revealed that they felt a sense of increased confidence and maturity in dealing with other adults, a more clearly defined set of beliefs about teaching and curriculum, and a more objective reflection on their own teaching. The most emphatic points made by the mentors centered on their astonishment regarding the magnitude and direction of their personal and professional growth apart from their direct work with the beginning teachers. In general, this sense of professionalism was evidenced in their comments about three aspects of the program: the freedom to create one's own time schedule, the development of a broader view of the district and education as a whole, and the desire to continue professional growth. Recommendations for staff developers for use in mentoring programs and stimulating professional development are presented. (Contains 15 references.) (JPB)

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Where Do We Go from Here?

Decisions and Dilemmas of Teacher Mentors

Melissa R. Freiberg, John Zbikowski, and Tom Ganser

University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

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Reactions to this paper are invited by the authors:

Melissa R. Freiberg
Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction
Univ. of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Whitewater, WI 53190
Office: (414) 472-1190
Fax: (414) 472-1988
freiberm@uwwvax.uww.edu

John Zbikowski
Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction
Univ. of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Whitewater, WI 53190
Office: (414) 472-4860
Fax: (414) 472-1988
zbikowsj@uwwvax.uww.edu

Tom Ganser
Office of Field Experiences
Univ. of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Whitewater, WI 53190
Office: (414) 472-1123
Fax: (414) 472-5716
gansert@uwwvax.uww.edu

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Where Do We Go from Here? Decisions and Dilemmas of Teacher Mentors

Mentoring and Staff Development

Today's staff developers are key players in mentoring programs for beginning teachers. This is certainly true in the case of district-based programs, but it is also true in other cases where staff developers provide an important linkage between sponsors of mentoring programs (universities, consortia of schools, and state departments) and schools (DeBolt, 1992). Their tasks can include selecting and training mentors, pairing beginning teachers with mentors, defining roles and responsibilities, designing mentoring activities, and evaluating program outcomes. They can also be involved in the more subtle task of integrating mentoring into professional development activities and the structure of schools.

Promoting a professional mentoring relationship between veteran teachers and new teachers makes sense as an alternative to an induction into teaching which might otherwise be little more than a traumatic "sink or swim" experience (Huling-Austin, 1990; Gold, 1996). Not surprisingly, organized mentoring programs which first emerged during the 1970s have become a regular component of staff development efforts (Furtwengler, 1995).

However, perspectives on mentoring as a staff development activity are changing today. Our current knowledge about mentoring is greater and more sophisticated than ever before. For example, we now acknowledge that basic features of mentoring (e.g., differentiation among teachers according to work experience) are initially destabilizing to schools as complex organizations, a fact that must be addressed to maximize the benefits of mentoring (Little, 1990). The important developmental role that mentoring plays in the careers of teachers as a part of life-long learning is more discussed (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). Most importantly, the view of mentoring as a discrete activity intended only to help beginning teachers deal with the "reality

shock" of teaching is disappearing. Mentoring programs that aim to provide little more than emotional support are no longer acceptable targets for limited resources. Increasingly, mentoring is valued to the extent that it is an integral part of schools as learning communities which require and actively promote collegiality among teachers, administrators, and support staff personnel (Jenlink, Kinnucan, Welsch, & Odell, 1996).

Perspectives on mentoring are also changing in response to an enlarged vision of staff development. Whereas thirty years ago staff development was generally limited to inservice workshops of brief duration, today it is far more differentiated and comprehensive (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990). Today's staff development efforts require a systems perspective and a reconceptualization of the work of teachers from the determination of goals to the selection of appropriate delivery systems (e.g., looping and distance learning) and assessment measures (e.g., performance-based and authentic assessment). Moreover, staff development is also being affected by the increased permeability of the boundaries between K-12 schools and the institutions of higher education that prepare teachers, especially as the professional development schools movement takes hold. The new vision of staff development calls for a fundamentally different mindset (Corcoran, 1995; Miller Nelson & Reigeluth, 1995; Sparks, 1994; Stout, 1996).

Taken together, the new perspectives on mentoring and on staff development promote a critical and expanded examination of mentoring programs. Clearly, the teacher who offers to be a casual "buddy" for a new teacher is no longer sufficient at a time when mentoring is often viewed as playing a central role in systemic reform.

The Study

This article is about five experienced teachers who served as mentors between January, 1992, and June, 1995. It is based on interviews conducted with them in January, 1992; May, 1992; and May, 1995. Their experiences are atypical among mentors inasmuch as they mentored up to ten beginning teachers on a full-time basis. At the end of their tenure as mentors, in September, 1995, four out of the five mentors assumed a teacher-leadership role in the school district; the fifth mentor retired.

The mentors worked in an urban school district with an enrollment of approximately 100,000. The mentoring program represents a high level of collaboration between the school administration and the teachers' union. The application process to become a mentor is extensive. It includes a written application, letters of reference, and an interview before the mentor board (seven teachers and six administrators). From over 80 applicants, a first cohort group of 18 mentors was selected in the fall of 1991, including the five mentors described in this article. As one feature of the program, teachers are not permitted to serve as mentors for more than three years (three and one-half years for the first group). Additional information about this program is available in Freiberg, Zbikowski, and Ganser (1994) and Ganser, Freiberg, and Zbikowski (1994a, 1994b).

Findings.

During their interviews, the mentors revealed a sense of increased confidence and maturity in dealing with other adults, a more clearly defined set of beliefs about teaching and curriculum, and a more objective reflection on their own teaching. The most emphatic points made by the mentors centered on their astonishment regarding the magnitude and direction of their personal

and professional growth apart from their direct work with the beginning teachers. From the earliest involvement through the final days in the program and in every interview, mentors referred to a sense of feeling more "professional" in their new position. In general, this sense of professionalism was evidenced in their comments about three aspects of the program: the freedom to create one's own time schedule, the development of a broader view of the district and education as a whole, and the desire to continue professional growth. "We've never been treated so professionally in our life...part of it is the freedom that we were given, the trust that was there: 'Go out to your schools. We trust you there'" (Mentor 3).

Because this was a new and unique program, mentors were given the task of defining the job and building a viable program. Within the guidelines of the program, which designated the number and location of the beginning teachers with whom mentors worked, the mentors themselves decided where, when, and how to best address the needs of new teachers.

Use of time.

In large part, the indicator of this more professional status was, "making the escape from bell schedules to creating your own schedule" (Mentor 5). As one mentor put it, "It is very refreshing after 22 years in a primary classroom of different levels to leave and go to the restroom when you need to and, if you have a headache, to be able to sit by yourself for five minutes" (Mentor 4). Mentors used the time during the day not only to visit beginning teachers, but also to gather resources, meet with specialists, attend conferences and inservices, prepare materials, and consult with other mentors. However, the escape from bells also meant that the day did not end with leaving the school or office. Mentors mentioned frequently exchanging phone calls with their mentees at night and on weekends. They encouraged or restricted these calls at their own discretion.

Sensing that there was an appropriate or "professional" use of time, mentors discussed how to handle "down time." This was the time between appointments, time spent driving from one site to another, and unexpected blocks of open time.

> It isn't that our days aren't full; they're very full . . . but you have that ability to go [deep sigh], now and then. You can get in the car, and even though you're going somewhere else, you're processing. . . . You don't have that chance when you're working with young children. (Mentor 4)

Mentors made a conscious decision that down time should be productive in some way, not only because of their own sense of responsibility, but also because of the impression made on others. "Rather than go sit in the lounge and read materials--even though it might be very valuable to me--I think it sends a message . . ." (Mentor 4). Another mentor said, "I don't want other teachers getting the impression that . . . I don't have something to do" (Mentor 3). It was apparent that mentors needed to meet others' and their own perceptions of what it meant to be professional.

Expanded views of teaching.

The minimal restrictions put on mentors' time and movement were only the most outward sign that they had moved beyond the perceived limitations of classroom teachers. Over the duration of the experience, mentors were able to recognize their own, often unexpected, personal and professional growth. As early as the second interview (conducted at the end of the first semester of the program), mentors were recognizing the changes. When asked who besides the beginning teachers benefited from the program, one mentor responded, "I've benefited too. I think it's expanded my awareness of [name of the district]. . . and education in general" (Mentor 1). This expanded, more global view was mentioned by all five of the mentors in this study. Although

mentors had always expressed a very positive view of the district (a consistent finding from the first interview across all eighteen original mentors), the experience of working in a number of different schools and with various personnel gave them the opportunity to see more of what was happening in the district. "You have the ability, obviously, to see a system that you've only seen in pieces before. My vision was very limited. . . . I learned that there's far more diversity among our schools than I had thought. And I don't mean population, I mean curriculum, curricular areas, or even style of running buildings" (Mentor 4). Seeing how all the pieces fit together was enlightening for one of the mentors who commented, "You see all the good things that are going on around you and it kind of inspires you. You grow so much because you've seen so much" (Mentor 3).

Interestingly, the broader view of the system led all five mentors to examine and question their own teaching strategies and principles. Instead of being frustrated by working with beginning teachers out of their area of expertise or grade level, their awareness of some universal elements of good teaching was heightened. "And the teaching part of what happens in the classroom is not dependent on the subject matter as much as it is on the understanding of how to get a particular point across" (Mentor 1). In addition, exposure to a variety of practices, curricula, and materials encouraged them to think of ways they would like to incorporate these new ideas into their own teaching. "I've learned a lot about the different strategies of teaching because, you know, sometimes we can get into a mold, a feeling that things only work one way, but you're able to learn from one another. New teachers have a lot to offer" (Mentor 2). Each mentor, in the final interview, mentioned some way in which their view of their own teaching might change or be improved.

The uniqueness of the mentoring program in which these mentors were involved piqued the interest and curiosity of many other districts and educational organizations and resulted in invitations to mentors to share their experiences. This opportunity was only possible because of the freedom and flexibility of the mentors' schedules. Mentors indicated that as classroom teachers they would have only very rarely considered the possibility of attending some of these conferences and, in fact, would probably never even have been aware of them. Mentors became farther removed from the isolation of the classroom as they shared experiences and ideas with educators across the country. They became aware of educational trends and practices beyond their experience, and this fueled a desire to learn even more.

Continued professional growth.

Each of the five mentors in the study stated that being a professional also meant that one continued to learn and grow, and that they would continue to make choices in their lives that would allow them to do that. Four out of the five mentors mentioned taking graduate classes, with three of them completing masters degrees in preparation for or during their tenure as mentors. Continued growth, for many of them, meant continued service to the field of education. "I will continue to mentor in spite of not being in the mentoring program" (Mentor 2). Several other mentors mentioned being asked to provide inservices, workshops, or classes, opportunities which they believe resulted from their visibility in the schools. One mentor will continue to teach a class for the local university, two regularly provide inservice training for district faculty, and all exiting mentors are involved in the training of the new mentors coming into the program.

An important point made by all five of the mentors was the importance of the mentor team in shaping and supporting them as professionals. Since each mentor brought with him or her different knowledge, skills, and strengths, the team learned to work cooperatively. "I would be at

a loss a lot of times for new ideas on how to handle a certain situation, but . . . I could come down here and talk to 17 other people" (Mentor 1). One mentor mentioned that she gained confidence in herself because she knew others valued her advice. Not only were mentors able to share ideas and suggestions for helping teachers in the classroom, but they trusted each other to carry out responsibilities. "Somebody said, 'I'll take care of it.' And everybody's volunteering because everyone is kind of a doer" (Mentor 3). The mentor team became not only a "pool of resources" (Mentor 5), but also a source of mentoring to each other. "We needed each other to support one another as much as the first year teachers needed us to support them" (Mentor 3). Looking toward the end of their tenure as mentors in this program, the mentors faced a new set of questions, emotions, and decisions about their future. When these experienced teachers entered the program, they were looking for something different, something challenging, something fulfilling, and all of them indicated that the experience had been just that. The opportunity to pioneer a new role arose at just the perfect time for many of them. One mentor, who was retiring, said, "It's a wonderful way to end a career" (Mentor 1), another saw the experience as rejuvenating: "It came for me at the very right time in my career after 19 ½ years of classroom work" (Mentor 5), and another saw a revelation of new possibilities "I've really found that I want to keep learning. And that if I go back to a classroom and do something I've done before, that I will kind of become stagnant" (Mentor 3).

Setting a new course.

In spite of the almost universal comment made by mentors early in the program that the hardest part of taking on the role of mentor full time meant not working directly with children in the classroom, only about one-third of the exiting mentors chose to go back to the classroom, and none of the five interviewed did so. This could be attributed to several factors. First, the wider

perspective gained from the experience led mentors to conclude that their work ultimately benefited the students and, therefore, the students could remain the central focus of their efforts in a variety of roles. Second, more opportunities for job possibilities, some of which they may not have even been aware of as teachers, were offered to them as a result of their experience in the mentoring program. Each of the five mentors stated that at least one offer of employment had been made without his or her making inquiries. Third, some of the positions offered provided opportunities to build on what they had learned as mentors or combined elements of mentoring and teaching which made the offers especially inviting. Fourth, the need for growth, once defined, is hard to ignore. "I think once I made the choice to change, that I was more willing to make other changes" (Mentor 3). Finally, having had the freedom and respect afforded them as mentors, it was difficult for many of them to envision themselves back in a more controlled environment. "As a classroom teacher, even as a senior classroom teacher on a staff that is considered a 'master' teacher, you don't have affirmations very often" (Mentor 4).

Leaving the program elicited ambivalent feelings. All five mentioned the pride they felt in the success and strength of the program and an appreciation for the opportunity for growth they gained from the experience. Some left with reluctance while others felt that, for their own good, it was time to move on, and good for the program to bring in new viewpoints and skills. At the onset of the program, most mentors said that a reason they chose to be mentors was a desire to contribute to the profession, to the district, and to helping children. All five in this study felt clearly that they had been able to achieve that goal. "I've seen what a difference functioning on a professional team, like the mentor team, has made. And how we, as a group, can put a pretty powerful thing together, because we have each other as resources" (Mentor 5).

Conclusions

The experience of the five mentors in this study reveals some important issues that staff developers may want to consider as part of their programming for beginning teachers. Although few school systems are big enough to support the kind of full-time program described here, elements of the program may be incorporated on a smaller scale in other programs. When planning a mentoring program, staff developers should be aware of the kinds of effects on both individual mentors and on the system as a whole that mentoring can bring about.

Mentoring, for these five individuals, brought about a transformation in the way professionals saw themselves and their role in a school system. On the one hand, their experience had been an enriching one for the district, of which they all chose to remain a part, and to which they were now able to make a more knowledgeable and individual professional commitment. Now the system is enriched by a cadre of teachers who have seen the big picture and who have a more sophisticated view of teaching and of the system, which ought to make them more effective participants in system-wide improvement efforts. Their more visible and mobile role strengthened their ability to contribute to staff development and to facilitate district-wide initiatives such as school-to-work. Also, through presentation at conferences, they increased the visibility of the district in a positive way.

On the other hand, confirming what Little (1990) found, mentoring was indeed a destabilizing influence for these teachers and for the system. Once they had experienced a degree of autonomy and responsibility not normally available to teachers in bureaucratic American school systems, none of these individuals wanted to return to precisely the same role that they had had previously. As one of the mentors put it informally shortly before his tenure came to an end,

"How do you keep them down on the farm now that they've seen Par-ee?" This was true even for the mentors who had early in the program expressed strong reluctance to forego the emotionally sustaining regular contact with their own classes. Whether the tendency to induce dissatisfaction with a career status quo outweighs the potential benefits of giving teachers the opportunity to expand their professional horizons may be a question for staff developers to ponder.

In any case, several elements of the program described here contributed to the transformation in these mentors' attitudes and abilities. Distinctive features of the program that played a part in this transformation included the following:

- Team building: The program was designed deliberately to foster a sense of community and collegiality among the team of mentors, providing them with a common office space, shared decision making, and common inservice experiences. The mentors repeatedly emphasized the value to them of having regular and sustained contact with colleagues working toward a shared goal.
- Opportunity to see other schools: Unlike most mentoring programs which are based in a single building, this program allowed the mentors not just to leave their own classrooms to serve as mentors, but to see how things worked in other buildings throughout the school system. It was their mobility that contributed to their ability to learn more about the district as a whole and to develop fresh analytical perspectives on their own work.
- Attendance at conferences: Mentors as well as mentees were encouraged to share their experiences at wider professional forums, such as the state associations for teacher educators, math teachers, and English teachers, and the national Association of Teacher

Educators. In addition to making the program more visible, these opportunities gave both mentors and beginning teachers a sense of their authority as scholars and as peer educators.

- Teacher-to-teacher consultation: From the outset of the program, mentors were encouraged to consider how they would share their expertise with colleagues. By working with beginning teachers, they not only honed their skills in teacher education, but they learned more about teaching than they previously knew, and were in a better position to consult with other colleagues once they concluded their tenure as mentors.

Recommendations for Staff Developers

These elements might be incorporated, entirely or in part, in mentoring programs in districts of various sizes as ways of stimulating the kind of professional development that the mentors spoke about during their interviews. Additionally, the experience of this mentoring program suggests several useful ways of thinking about mentoring when some or all of the elements of this program are in place:

- Think of mentoring not just as a help for beginning teachers, but as a stage in career development for mentors as well. Being a mentor could have life-long salutary effects.
- For programs in which mentors serve for a limited term, consider explicitly, at the outset, what mentors will be doing after they finish a tour of duty as mentors. If the experiences of the teachers in this study are any indication, it is unrealistic, and probably a waste of potential systemic benefits, to expect mentors to return to exactly the same roles they had before assuming the mentor role.

- Expand opportunities for teachers to serve as mentors. Because mentoring can afford mutual learning experiences for mentor and mentee, it is only fair to give as many qualified experienced teachers as possible a chance to experience the kind of personal growth and professional renewal seen among the mentors in this program.
- Present mentoring as a career goal. Being selected as a mentor involves recognition of achievement, and it brings intrinsic rewards.
- When developing a teacher mentor program, build in a system-wide perspective. Consider how, for example, mentoring can provide an avenue for better communication within a district. and can enhance the knowledge, skill, and confidence of many individuals at different stages in their careers throughout the system.

Mentoring can generate as much, if not more professional development for the mentor as it does for beginning teachers. The experiences of five mentor teachers hints at the possibility that experienced teachers in general have an unfulfilled need for awareness of the world outside their own classrooms, a need that, when fulfilled, can enhance their own awareness and others' awareness of the value of their perspective, influence, and contributions within a system. Taking on substantial mentoring responsibilities for a time allows teachers to increase their scope and visibility within a system. It also provides a way to fulfill a parallel need to give back to the profession in return for the satisfaction that they have derived from it themselves.

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